



CITY OF NEW YORK

MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD FOUR

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JEAN-DANIEL NOLAND
Chair

ROBERT J. BENFATTO, JR., ESQ.
District Manager

March 7, 2008

Robert B. Tierney
Landmarks Preservation Commission
Municipal Building, ninth floor
One Center Street
New York, NY 10007

Re: 304 West 47th Street – former house of Fire Engine Company 54

Dear Chair Tierney:

Manhattan Community Board 4 supports the designation as a New York City landmark of the former house of Fire Engine Company 54 at 304 West 47th Street, currently leased by the city to the Puerto Rican Traveling Theater and displaying large signage for “Forbidden Broadway.” The fire company itself has moved to a low modern firehouse across Eighth Avenue on the corner of 48th Street. The Board welcomes the calendaring of this evocative relic of the past of the Clinton neighborhood and looks forward to a prompt hearing and designation.

The firm of Napoleon Lebrun and Sons acted as official architect for the Fire Department for a long period in the late 19th Century. Where the fire company occupied a prominent location like Engine Company 31 on Lafayette Street in the Civic Center, the firm could respond with a lavish structure resembling a French chateau; but the typical structure elsewhere was of a smaller, simpler type of which this is one of several variations. It is in fact almost identical, as has been pointed out, to one recently designated on East 104th Street.

The one-lot wide building has a ground story framed in cast-iron with ornamented columns framing a wide central engine entrance and doorways for the firefighters on either side. The beam above supports in this case three stories of diminishing windows. A feature here is the use of brick laid between the stores and at the top in courses projecting at an angle. This produces a diapered texture that is particularly striking around the arches of the windows of the top story below the typical projecting cornice.

Such a design fits into the dominantly brick walls of the apartment or tenement neighborhood surrounding them, while the strong red-painted entrance enframing marks it clearly as a firehouse and thus a civic building. Such buildings enrich the historic

texture of the city and deserve preservation, whether in their original function or in adaptive reuse.

While the Board is glad that this building has caught the notice of the Commission, we feel strongly that preservation of the historic character and identity of the Clinton community in the midst of the pressures of gentrification and development requires further action by this Commission. Previous studies by the Commission, as well as by the Landmarks Conservancy and others, have identified many other historic resources in this area. For example, only a few blocks away on 51st Street is the handsome redbrick Sacred Heart Church, fitting similarly into the neighborhood, that Lebrun designed as well—he was especially noted for his church architecture. This fine building has been long familiar to the Board, which met for years in the basement of the rectory.

A hearing was held on a number of these resources at the time of Midtown Rezoning, but this led to few designations. Some resources have been lost, but others remain—perhaps not for long. The Board has recently formed a task force to identify historic resources and advocate for preservation in Clinton. We hope to work with the Commission to this end.

Sincerely,



Jean-Daniel Noland
Chair, Manhattan Community Board 4



Edward Kirkland
Chair, Landmarks Task Force

Cc: Borough President Scott Stringer
U. S. Representative Jerrold Nadler
State Senator Thomas Duane
Assembly Member Richard Gottfried
Council Speaker Christine Quinn
Nadezhda Williams, Historic Districts Council
Lisa Kersavage, Municipal Art Society